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Residency for Artists on Hiatus: Interview with Shinobu Akimoto and Matthew Evans (a.k.a. smfoundation)

by Amish Morrell

Residency for Artists on Hiatus (RFAOH) is a collaborative artwork by Shinobu Akimoto and Matthew Evans in which participants are invited to suspend their art practice and to produce non-art for the duration of the residency. Operating as both a virtual and functioning residency, RFAOH consists of a formal organizational structure that includes two Directors (Akimoto and Evans) and an advisory board, with an application process whereby artists who have produced a pre-existing body of work propose a non-art activity they would complete during the residency. (By the time this issue is published, RFAOH will have selected participating on-hiatus residents.) Conducting these activities anywhere they like, residents will document and share these activities via the RFAOH website, and are required to submit a final report upon the completion of the residency. As Directors/Coordinators of RFAOH, Akimoto and Evans will support participants by seeking funding and an institutional host for the residency's website, promoting the residency at art events, designing objects with the RFAOH logo, and producing an annual report in the form of a catalogue documenting its activities. This June, Akimoto and Evans were in Venice promoting the residency during the opening days of the Biennale. *C Magazine* caught up with them later over email, conducting this interview while they were in Montreal.



smfoundation, Residency for Artists on Hiatus
at the Venice Biennale, 2013
IMAGE COURTESY OF SMFOUNDATION

AMISH MORRELL (AM) *How did the idea for RFAOH come about?*

SMFOUNDATION (SMF) Probably several things but mainly triggered by our own personal experience.

MATT When I moved to Japan around 2003, I kind of cut my relationship to the Canadian art community—I found it increasingly difficult to stay engaged; or rather, I became less and less interested in this networking, negotiating the art world stuff, and much more interested in other things—travelling, studying another language, broadening my community, and so on. I was never really good at “being on the scene” in the first place but this physical distance made it more difficult to keep up the fortitude. It begs this question about all the other unmentioned aspects that “being an artist” entails—the social obligations or cultivating necessary people skills, keeping this identity going, which demands some kind of outside validation, and so on. Since returning to Canada, I have been looking to re-integrate into art in a way that provides more authentic opportunities to work with other people. In this sense, I am most excited about the collaborative aspect of this project beyond the two of us, and really, I aim to somehow re-imagine this period away as something worth mining creatively.

SHINOBU While “making art” in the past, I always felt blown away or defeated by other [non-art] people's creations—amazing designs

or earnest but wacky ideas—and the only way to compete with them as a creator was to make more out of it by placing it in this peculiar art context, which I knew how to do. At the time, there were enough sources of inspiration. Then I kind of ran out of them, and maybe ran out of energy as well. I wished I wasn't making art in this particular way. While it's true that we may be addressing some larger questions about institutions and artists' identity issues in this project, I honestly think that it came about as a pure reflection upon my own state or phase as an artist. It was also as an attempt to explore a new way of engaging in artmaking—to design the website and products, administrate, curate and so on, and yet still seek to be conceptually critical and inspiring, without completely retiring and becoming a designer or something else. In the meantime, as cheesy as it may sound, I do have a slight hope that this project could also act as a kind of catalyst for people who relate with what we are talking about to maybe feel more at ease about it, or find some inspiration and get back on track, or quit completely to find a much better occupation. And they can get at least a \$30 stipend a month.

AM *There is a somewhat absurd way RFAOH frames one's non-art activities in relation to one's artistic ambitions and career, by having a residency where the artist is invited to not make art. Despite being about not making art, it has many of the institutional trappings of an art organization, where applicants submit proposals and documentation of their*



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activities, and are listed on your website as participants. By this logic, they could be hosted by an institution, as you propose, and include their non-art as part of an exhibition. Through these institutional trappings that you've created, it seems that the project provokes an examination of what constitutes artistic practice and how it's shaped by larger economic and institutional structures—it reveals the contexts that produce art, and also reveals how they separate it from life.

You've been promoting RFAOH at places like the Venice Biennale, where thousands of people from across the art world have gathered, and are also seeking institutional support or an institutional host for the project. What kinds of responses have you been getting? And what kinds of issues do these responses raise in relation to ideas you're trying to explore?

SMF Well, we had started proposing the project way before we launched the website this spring to international institutions like the Baltic Centre, Witte de With, the New Museum, and the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, whose educational or public programmes we felt were more innovative. And why not? It's not like we were looking for exhibition floor space. By "host," we just wanted them to provide a link, a banner ad for example, to the RFAOH website from their website, and possibly some financial support. We have received only one official rejection—from Baltic Centre—though. They have no time to bother with proposals from nobodies like us, as we all know. We also failed to secure funding from granting agencies four times, but we kind of expected this. Who'd give public money to artists trying to make art about artists not making art?

We also put an ad on *e-flux*. It cost us \$800, which is a lot of money for a one-time email posting. But, at the same time, *e-flux* claims to have "80,000 arts professional subscribers from all over the world," so we felt compelled since we really want to participate in this domain and reach certain people, and have an international pool of applicants. So we asked them: "You know, we're just artists. Our project is an artwork and not a normal residency per se; we actually aren't some institution with lots of money. Is there an artists' rate?" And almost immediately they responded that unfortunately they only post things on behalf of "institutions" and were now sorry that they couldn't run our ad. So we wrote back and said: "that seems a little exclusionary if you only promote mainstream and institutionally sanctioned projects." Then a day or so later they replied that, since they "liked" our project, they would run it. But it was still \$800.

So we have complaints about institutions and the system, but also understand their socio-political roles and why they operate the way they do. We are also aware of our bittersweet relationship to them as a product of highly institutionalized art education. Are we criticizing that? We don't know. Clearly we are not Pussy Riot. As you imply, this project makes us an "institution" with our own rules, and we have realized how easy it is to practice the kind of authority we complain about.

To address these layers of contradiction and

paradox that artists inevitably go through, we feel that it'll be most effective to have an endorsement from a capital-'I' institution. That is, to both reify and legitimize not only the project but also all these non-art activities of the participants, who likely would not be considering a hiatus if they already enjoyed that kind of institutional recognition. It's a way of poking at this political apparatus, complete with its own institutional agenda, which so many artists—us included—feel compelled to participate in, regardless of if it's in our best interests or not.

AM It's interesting to hear how *e-flux* read your ad, given some of the more experimental projects, such as Time-Bank, that it's associated with. But I suspect they don't take Hour Notes (Time-Bank currency) as payment for postings. Based on the applications that you have received, how do artists conceive the notion of hiatus and how does it figure into their proposals? Do they propose to simply not make art and instead work at a different job for the duration of the residency, or does the hiatus somehow become explained or rationalized as an artistic practice or an artwork unto itself?

SMF Once we ran the *e-flux* ad, we were inundated with applications and inquiries from people from all over the world, who obviously didn't actually visit our website or read our criteria but were keen to come to Montreal and work on their artwork, to participate in this international residency circuit or be legitimized by our "fake" residency institution. It's been fascinating.

At this point, we have more of these "misunderstood" applications, and initially we were like, "man, people just don't read," or "well, lots of these artists' first language isn't English." But after going to Venice and experiencing this epitome of international art and politics, we started thinking: "gosh, maybe these artists are desperate for the opportunity to take their work abroad." It makes us very conscious of our own struggles and reconfirms that the questions we are asking are esoteric and catered to a specific crowd of people. Having said that, of course we would love co-conspirators worldwide, who'd click in with what we are really talking about and are willing to make a "collaborative artwork" with us. We are crossing our fingers to receive those applications too.

AM Are there ways that you think this project might materialize a critique of the more facile aspects of participation in the art world? For instance, some artists gain credibility merely through trafficking in familiar discourses, and consequently move more easily through professional networks of curators and critics, achieving institutional legitimacy and a certain degree of success. We all know that there's an enormous amount of networking that's required, such as attendance at Biennales, travel to see exhibitions and socializing with people who are well-connected. But I'm wondering if this can sometimes run

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counter to the need for critical action that often inspired artists' practices in the first place?

SMF But the irony is that, even for our quaint web-based project outside the mainstream, so to speak, the amount of networking required is overwhelming! As we said, we are torn about it. Maybe we are simply envious of institutional legitimacy, or maybe we are bored with the predictability of it all, so we are trying to create our own legitimacy with this project. This "critique" was never our main motivation. We're not even sure "facile participation in the art world" and art's potential for critical action are mutually exclusive, but we are quite curious how people negotiate this so-called contradiction. We saw some good examples at the Venice Biennale this year. The project is more about exploring the limits or parameters of this notion of creativity and of where one's art career begins and/or ends, and how much of that may be independent of the institutional pressures of the art world.

We are also aware that our project is pretty esoterically self-referential—it's an artwork that addresses the limits of one's artist-ness or relationship to art world hierarchies, and we wonder if such a project would even mean anything to people outside this field. Are we not just playing to the home team while negotiating our own position within it? Does this type of "critical action" even have any wider relevance? I guess we'll forever deal with this divide within ourselves that, on one hand, we feel contemporary art is a silly, privileged exercise and we would rather reach a wider audience through different approaches or means and, on the other, agreeing with Jake

Chapman¹ that as soon as art becomes a badge of social membership its potential for critical action is eroded.

AM You say that artists might not be looking for a hiatus if they had institutional recognition. Is participation in RFAOH an admission of defeat?

SMF To us, this is THE question—we do worry that such a perception or stigma could prevent many interesting "on-hiatus" artists from applying. We also wonder whether we would have come up with this project if we ourselves had been as "successful" as some of our peers. Once again, it is a question of "defeat" according to whom? We have received inquiries about whether teaching at a post-secondary art institution may be considered as hiatus. If one considers that art is about making opportunities to explore our whims or to live a certain lifestyle, helping others to critically make art is a valid way to engage with it, isn't it? It's also a different kind of institutional recognition. What about doing "non-art" or un-related things using the money one made through something related to art? All these questions have to be answered by the candidates themselves. This project attempts to induce an institutional endorsement of production that the artists themselves have declared is not art, which may reify this "defeat." We think this poses curious questions, perhaps about how we allow our own "institutions" to impose expectations (and criteria) upon us, or how offering an endorsement (conceptually and financially) for not making art may compare to the endorsement one might earn while making art. We guess we'll see when the residency starts. x

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The website for Residency for Artists on Hiatus is: <http://residencyforartistsonhiatus.org>

Amish Morrell is Editor of C Magazine.

Endnote

¹ Jake and Dinos Chapman, quoted in Malcolm Quinn "The whole world+the work: questioning context through practice-led research," in *Working Papers in Art and Design 4* (2006). http://item.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/vol4/mq-full.html (Accessed July 29, 2013).



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